

Out of jail and into the work force

Dan Rodricks

May 20, 2009

The phone keeps ringing at my desk in the newsroom and, five times out of 10, the person on the other end of the line is an ex-offender looking for a job. Men and women with criminal records keep calling here (410-332-6166), saying they've just been released from prison - or that they were released a year ago - and still can't find work. Too many companies aren't hiring, they say, and the ones that are hiring won't take a chance on them.

This remains a chronic problem, the unemployed ex-offender looking for work. It's the main reason why the estimated national recidivism rate - the rate of return of inmates to prison within three years of their release - is about 67 percent. In Maryland, the numbers are better; "only" about half of the people we release from the Department of Corrections commit a crime and go back on the taxpayer tab (at between \$25,000 and \$27,000 annually) within three years.

What's the answer?

Political leadership that puts corrections back into corrections would be a start.

Maryland needs to adopt a comprehensive re-entry program that considers most inmates as being in a state of "pre-release" the moment they enter our correctional system. It appears that we already have such a program, or at least one that helps offenders prepare for real life before they walk out the jailhouse door.

This week, a New York-based think tank released a report touting the program as a model for the nation. The program puts inmates to work and saves significant taxpayer dollars in the process.

The report, from the Manhattan Institute's Center for Civic Innovation, points to Montgomery County's Pre-Release and Reentry Services Division. It operates a residential facility in Rockville for inmates within one year of scheduled release from local, state and federal custody. The program is relatively small - average daily enrollment of 160 to 200 offenders - but nearly 90 percent of the program participants obtain jobs.

Critics of pre-release programs will be surprised (or maybe pleased) to learn that the Montgomery program's motto is, "Freedom through responsibility." Inmates are expected to find their own jobs - they wouldn't pick up job-search skills otherwise - and they have to pay the county for providing them with pre-release services.

"The PRC expects newly enrolled inmates to secure employment within three weeks," notes Anne Piehl, the Rutgers researcher who authored the report. "Until an inmate finds work, he or she is required to search weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4:40 p.m., which means no television or recreation or visits during those times."

Inmates have to be honest and tell prospective employers about their criminal records. "One

might wonder," Ms. Piehl writes, "why employers who know these things about such applicants would hire them. But they do. ... The PRC provides extensive monitoring of the substance use and lifestyles of its residents. In addition, some employers report that this population shows lower turnover. ... Low turnover, reliability, and sobriety are important employment attributes and can be relatively rare in the low-wage labor market."

The Montgomery PRC offers inmates relatively small rewards to keep them working and on time - later curfews, for instance, and eventually expanded hours for visitors. "Progress to a new level [of incentive] occurs when hurdles such as retaining employment for a certain period of time are surmounted," Ms. Piehl reports. "The levels provide inmates with a series of incentives to hold on to their jobs and improve their work performance."

Inmates have to use the money they earn to pay for the program and make payments toward child support, victim restitution, court costs and fines. They also have to save money, and by the time the average offender has been released from custody, he has \$600 in the bank.

Here's my favorite part of Ms. Piehl's report, and one that even conservative critics of re-entry programs might enjoy:

"Of the over \$2 million earned by participants, nearly \$350,000 is paid to the county as 'program fees.' In addition, the county saves 63,000 bed days in the local jails. Valued at a typical per diem of \$100 per day, these savings come to \$6 million."

Dan Rodricks' column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. He is host of the midday talk show on WYPR-FM.